

The 10 Pillars of a University: Investment in bricks and mortar will not stop dilapidation of these Pillars!

“What should Universities be?” was the title of a conference organised by USAP and held from 22-23 November 2018 at the University of Sydney. Representatives from more than 10 universities participated in the event. There were thought-provoking lectures (also see summary report, 1), which triggered lively discussions both during the main conference and its public debate (2).

The key outcomes of the conference were subsequently condensed into *The 10 Pillars of a University*, which have been discussed and approved by the University of Sydney professoriate. The current version is attached to this annual report. These “Pillars” have also been published online (2) and sent to all Australian universities for further improvement with the aim of creating a national consensus position statement. The final Pillars are intended to serve as a reference and common ground for planned joint activities of the Australian professoriates.

In order to facilitate the establishment of professoriate organizations at all Australian universities and to be able to operate jointly at the national level, the *Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP)* was incorporated in New South Wales on 30 January 2019. The objects for which the Association has been established are to: 1. enable professors to fulfil collectively their special roles and responsibilities at the different Australian Universities where they work, 2. assist professors in forming collectives of their own by facilitating the establishment of local chapters of the Association, 3. provide consultation to Government and other groups of people (bodies, institutions, systems) that are in need of high quality information and advice, 4. promote academic and democratic values, and 5. undertake any other activities in furtherance of the above.

At a meeting of the University of Sydney professoriate on 20 June 2019 it was agreed to send the Pillars

- To all members of the University of Sydney Professoriate
- To the Provost, with a request for endorsement
- To the incoming Provost, for noting and endorsement
- To the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor for noting with an invitation for endorsement
- To all members of Senate
- To all members of the Senior Executive Group
- To all attendees of last year's conference, “What should Universities be?”
- To all other Australian University Executives and Academic Boards (where in existence)

- To all contactable Australian Professors, for noting and possible input for improvement
- To select media outlets

All actions with the exception of the last two have been completed. It seems reasonable to wait with a media campaign until the final Pillars have been nationally agreed. It was also decided at the meeting that opening up AAUP to other University staff should be considered in future. This question can be revisited once AAUP is fully operational at the national level. In fact, the US version of AAUP is open to other University staff but national conditions may require adjustments. It was further agreed that a possible collaboration with the NTEU at the national level can also be discussed once AAUP is fully operational. Finally, it was decided to hold a follow-up Symposium, "What should a University be in 2030?", at the end of 2020. This conference could be the first official gathering of the Australian professoriates.

Expressions of interest and positive feedback in response to the AUUP initiative have been received from colleagues at 13 Australian universities so far although it is still very early days. Moreover, in addition to the University of Sydney chapter (USAP), de facto AAUP chapters now exist at JCU, SWIN, UNE and WSU. This gives reason for optimism.

The need for developing AAUP is an objective one considering that the current problems of Australian universities have developed under the eyes of a number of established government as well as academic organisations. We are now in a situation where external (!) commercial consultants boldly claim to have sufficient knowledge to be able to advise on how universities should be run. This not only lacks substance but is also very dangerous for Society which is facing threats to democracy on a global scale as well as the arrival of artificial intelligence that requires sound ethical controls. The latter need to be worked out on the basis of in-depth analysis and learnt debate for which universities are uniquely equipped.

To make things worse, even the long-standing international consensus on the inseparable nexus between teaching and research as formulated in the Magna Carta Universitatum (3) is now being questioned by some Australian politicians while the critical thinking required to take on new complex challenges is nowhere better acquired than through original and ground-breaking scholarly research.

Having a large national group of experts that is capable of providing validated facts and best advice to politicians while speaking with one voice based on democratic consensus and only bound by academic principles may help solve the above and new societal problems in an increasingly complex world.

Due to the absence of such a body and the silence of most senior academics, the necessary public financial support for truly independent research has also dried up and often populist government funding streams have been created instead that now side-track or even block investigator-driven original discoveries. A healthier alternative is overdue. The following quote (4) summarizes the problem well:

“I think that the situation is quite difficult because there is simply not enough money for basic research. I particularly deplore that many funding agencies have shifted their support from basic to translational research. I as a taxpayer would always insist that my money goes to basic rather than translational research, because in a capitalist Western system, as soon as there is something to translate, as soon as there is a product that can be brought to market, there are mechanisms to take care of that. Basic research has historically provided the most valuable insights – valuable not only in the intellectual sense but also in the economic sense. That tends to get lost at the moment. There is also a tendency of some funding agencies to force conglomerates of researchers into collaboration. Innovative science is ultimately a grass roots enterprise driven by individuals – it's people being allowed to follow their ideas, and that needs to be protected.”

Highly trained people being allowed to follow their ideas and serving as mentors and role models for students that may thus be enabled to become the critical and innovative thinkers democratic societies desperately need, that's what universities are for (see attached Pillars for more details). It is in our hands to rectify the situation and it is not too late.

Topics such as artificial intelligence in academic decisions, the theme of an upcoming symposium held jointly by the Academic Board and the Professoriate of the University, illustrate the opportunity for broad high-level institutional debate that can serve Society in a most useful way.

Colleagues interested in joining USAP Council are always welcome.

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2 August 2019

References

- 1) <https://usap.sydney.edu.au/what-should-universities-be/>
- 2) <https://twitter.com/universitiesbe>
- 3) <http://www.magna-charta.org/>
- 4) <https://mostlyscience.com/2015/08/prof-gero-miesenbock-a-man-of-the-mind/>